

they held for contemporaries. Inevitably Gillespie's resolutely atemporal and anti-political account of modernity will prove skewed and drastically distorting.

Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era

Judith Perkins. Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies. London/New York: Routledge, 2009. ISBN 9780415397445. Pp. x + 209.

Reviewed by Meredith Warren, McGill University

In *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era* Judith Perkins examines the early Christian emphasis on the body and bodily resurrection expected by some early Christians. For Perkins, the body is an indicator of elite and non-elite identity and was for this reason embraced by early Christians. Perkins uses ancient Greek Romance novels, long known to be witnesses to the elite values of the ancient Mediterranean, as a foil to early Christian texts such as apocryphal acts and martyrdom texts. Perkins convincingly argues that the emphasis on corporal punishment in Christian texts reflects a rejection of an unequal justice system and the expectation of a future, egalitarian one.

Perkins' focus on the novels limits her to the Greek-speaking world of the Eastern Empire, where, conveniently, Christians made up a noticeable part of the population. Perkins is explicit about her attempts to break down an artificial division between Christians and pagans in the ancient world, and acknowledges that in doing so she introduces another, more indigenous, dichotomy: elite/non-elite. For Perkins, Christian identities in the ancient world say more about class than they do about religion; Christian identity formation makes use of the body in order to define itself against *elite* (rather than pagan) modes of justice.

In chapter one Perkins notes similarities in constructing both Christian and Greco-Roman identities through cultural activities. Roman and non-Roman elites found common ground in embracing Roman education and other practices; Christians formed a universalizing identity by denying the body's vulnerability to pain and death, after the model of Jesus (41).

The importance of the Greek novels for early Christianity is well-known—in chapter two, Perkins emphasizes that fiction reflects a common attempt to negotiate cultural and social identity. The body in the novel defines its owner's chastity. The protagonists' bodies are constantly threatened, but as elites, no physical harm can come to them; likewise, their identity as elites in the Roman Empire remains intact. For Perkins, this highlights the Greek elites' relationship to the authority of Rome and its justice system. Like low-status characters in the novels, Christians are at risk for gruesome deaths, and just as for the social outcasts in the novels, death is

real. Christian texts emphasize the physical resilience of the characters *despite* their corporal vulnerability.

According to Perkins' third chapter, the Greek novels' passive male leads support the civic harmony idealized by the authors of the novels and by political writers of the time (64–66). Perkins points out that for the purpose of the novels, desire and status are one and the same, illustrating the relationship between status and the body in the Greek mind. In the romances, whole, beautiful bodies symbolise the elite whereas ugly or misshapen bodies represent the lower social strata (74–75).

In the fourth chapter Perkins applies the concept of the “leaking body” as an ancient social metaphor for status. Body/soul dualism is a mainstay of Classical philosophy and thus the “degradation of the flesh holds implications for the body social” (92). Some Christians rejected the dichotomy, insisting that human beings consist of both body and soul, both of which will therefore be resurrected. Perkins rightly acknowledges the divergent opinions on bodily resurrection and the incarnation within Christian circles; for her, this very divergence highlights the significance of the body for early Christianity. Using 2 Clement, Perkins shows that concern with material resurrection is always paired with a concern for heavenly justice and judgement. The physicality of the resurrection is a direct critique of the exemption of elite bodies from execution and physical pain in the earthly justice system. That the Christian body is honourable even when broken is a commentary on a social system which disembodies the elite and views low-status bodies with disgust. Perkins argues that for early Christians, the incarnation of Jesus revalues the body and breaks down social barriers (102).

The fifth chapter revisits the novels to extract elite views of the body and their corresponding expectations of justice. In each fictional case where punishment is given, it corresponds to the social status of the condemned. Perkins also argues for the importance of elite/non-elite spaces in constructing identity. Whereas in the romance novels, the protagonists meet in spaces that foster social cohesion, such as civic festivals (14), Christian narratives are frequently located in negative spaces, such as prisons (114–115; c.f. *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, *Acts of Thomas*). In doing so, the Christian narratives remove the authority usually embodied by civic or public elite space and relocate it in this anti-social space. As such, the Christian body is really the social body; the imprisoned, tortured body re-appropriates social cohesion and authority.

Chapter six draws attention to non-Christian non-elite groups who had similar problems with normative attitudes towards the body. Petronius' *Satyricon* portrays a dinner party held by the Freedman, Trimalchio. Trimalchio's speeches about the body's baseness and about the changeableness of naming suggests, for Perkins, the pagan underclass' opposition to normative ideas about the body and an openness to

social change. This aligns the lower pagan strata more closely with the low-status Christians than with their elite co-religionists.

Chapter seven argues that bodily resurrection means the institutionalized rejection of the baseness of the material body. Using two early Christian texts, Perkins shows that texts where the material Christ and resurrection are denied are more closely in tune with pagan elite concerns than texts where they are emphasized. The *Acts of Peter* claims that Jesus had a real, human body and also displays a preference for de-valued social groups (150); *Acts of John*, on the other hand, refuses Jesus' materiality and likewise maintains normative hierarchical societal expectations.

Chapter eight examines potential problems associated with the valuation of martyrdom and the broken body. Perkins argues that, far from encouraging violence against the human body, texts like *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* actually promote empathy for the body because of its worthiness in God's eyes. Using Judith Butler's argument that the recognition of universal human vulnerability should lead to a community of cooperation and acceptance (160), Perkins argues that Perpetua seeks to demonstrate the frailty of the human body and its shared vulnerability among both elites and slaves.

In the final chapter, Perkins contrasts the historical viewpoints of the Second Sophistic and the Christians. While the Second Sophistics' dependence on history in fact plays into the elite's control of the empire, the Christians' imagination of the future works to destabilize the present system. To conclude her work, Perkins argues that Christianity actually changed the monopoly of authority held by the elite and revoked their protection from physical punishment, fragmenting the power of the traditional upper class.

Perkins' book not only firmly enunciates the importance of the body for the formation of early Christian identity, but also successfully argues for the cooperation between Classics and Religious Studies. While the elite and Christians were both concerned with the body, the elite allegiance to imperial power resulted in their disassociation with the physical, and likewise their exemption from base, physical justice. Christians, however, inverted justice by embracing not only their physicality but also that of their God. It is only through this interdisciplinary lens that Perkins is able to tease out these important conclusions.